

6/6/04 This is the second draft of the chapter on Online Poker in Hold'em Brain by King Yao. Please email feedback, suggestions, comments, opinions, questions to KingYao@HoldemBrain.com or you could use the Feedback Form to email me at the bottom of the page

Hold'em Brain: Online Poker

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In general, online poker needs to be attacked the same way as poker in a brick and mortar casino. In order to play well and win, one always has to adjust to the players and the circumstances. There are differences between the average online player compared to the average brick and mortar player, but those differences are small enough that some logical adjustments should do the trick. In that respect, this section on online poker is specifically aimed at the differences and uniqueness that online poker presents.

Legality

It is clear that the United States government will go after any entity that tries to start an online casino or poker room if the entity is located in United States territory. However it is not clear what the legal status is on players playing online games in the United States on computer servers in foreign countries. This is the case with all the popular online poker sites. Some government officials have stated that there is nothing they can do about it because there are simply too many players and they cannot arrest a million people (or more) for gambling in their own homes (this includes sports betting and other casino games as well). However, whether or not the government will take any action on players, does not say anything about the actual legality of online poker. As of yet, there is no definitive answer whether or not online poker is legal. It is possible that in the future the legality will be defined more clearly, and it is useful to keep up-to-date when any news breaks.

Although this section is about online poker, in no way am I claiming it as a legal activity nor am I suggesting that anyone go out and play online poker. That is up to the individual to make the decision for themselves.

Reasons to Play Poker on the Internet

There are many reasons for playing poker on the internet.

1. You do not live close to a poker room

Legal poker rooms are now all over America, but many people still live far from a poker room. Online poker is a nice solution for the people that do not have a chance to play poker on a regular basis in brick and mortar card rooms.

2. Even if there is a poker room in your vicinity, you do not have to commute.

Many players do live closer to a poker room but find that it usually takes a bit of a commute to get there. Even if you live fairly close to the casino, it may still take half an hour or more to get to the poker room, and even then, you may have to wait a bit before getting into a game. On the internet, there is no need to commute and the wait for a seat is typically much shorter than in a brick and mortar casino. Also, for those that are physically challenged and find it difficult to commute or go

to a casino, playing poker online is an ideal solution. They will be able to play comfortably at home, whereas they may not be comfortable in a casino environment.

3. There is no second hand smoke

A few years ago, the state of California banned smoking in certain establishments. Casinos and poker rooms were affected by the new law and now there is no smoking in California poker rooms.

Several other poker rooms across the country have also made this adjustment to non-smoking poker rooms, such as the Bellagio in Las Vegas and Foxwoods in Connecticut. This is all great for the player. However, even if the poker room itself is a non-smoking room, many of the non-Californian casinos still allow smoking in other parts of their casinos. The smoke can often creep around in the air and find their way to the poker room. Since players are sitting down for long periods of time, they may be susceptible to the harmful effects of second hand smoking. Even worse are the poker rooms that do allow smoking. For those who are worried about second hand smoke, playing poker online is a healthy alternative.

4. The rake may be lower online

Many of the online poker rooms offer a lower rate per hand than brick and mortar casinos. They may still collect a higher rake per hour because typically they deal more hands per hour in an online poker room. This is a benefit to players as they get to keep a bigger portion of the pots that they win. The only situation where it may not be a benefit to players is in a situation like heads-up poker where the rake is usually negotiable between the players and the poker room management but would not be online.

5. There is no tipping online

Tipping is a somewhat controversial topic. In brick and mortar casinos, a major part of the dealers' income comes from tips. However tips do eat up on potential profits from the winning players, and it increases the losses for the losing players. Online poker requires no tipping, you cannot tip even if you wanted to. This means the winning players will make more money and the losing players can play longer, or at least play more hands.

6. You can play any time of day

Online poker rooms are 24 hours a day operations. If there are players, there are games. Once an online poker room reaches a certain critical mass, they will likely have games at all times of day at all limits. Not every site has this feature as they are not all that successful, but there are a few sites that have achieved this critical mass. This means players can play any time of day they feel like. This is great for many people, including morning people, people who work at night and can only play during the day and people who are nightowls that play in the wee hours of the morning

7. You can play for a very short time if you prefer

If you make the effort to go to the local poker room, you probably feel you should stay there for a while. Nobody likes to drive half an hour just to play a couple of minutes and then drive another half an hour to get home. This is different with online poker. You could play one round which may take as little as one minute, you could play for five minutes and decide to leave. This is a great option for all players, although it does make for a relatively high turnover of players at the online game compared to the brick and mortar game.

8. There are easier ways to analyze your own play online

Most of the online poker sites have an option where you can see your hand histories. This makes for analyzing your own play much easier than in a brick and mortar casino, where the only way to track your own play is to actually write every single hand down, this is simply not practical for most people, not to mention the tremendous effort it would take. Recently several people have developed software to help players analyze their game. It may be worthwhile to find out about these software programs to see if they can help you analyze your own game.

9. There are easy ways to analyze the play of other players

Many sites have a function where you can write notes on each player, and these notes are accessible the next time you are at the same table as those players. This is a nice feature that is unique to online poker. There are also software programs that allow for the analysis of other players' games. These software programs can only look at the hands that your opponents played when you were in the game with them and not every game that they have played, but this could still be useful.

10. More hands are dealt per hour online

When players are paying attention, more hands are usually dealt per hour online compared to brick and mortar games. There is no need to wait for the dealer to shuffle, take in the mucked cards, collect the chips, make change, take the rake or time, get a rack fill, call for empty seats, settle player disputes and all sorts of other issues. For the player who plays with a positive expectancy, more hands per hour means a higher expected profit.

11. Shorthanded games are easy to find online

It is difficult to find a shorthanded game in a brick and mortar casino and when it exists, it may not last for long. Often these games will break up as most players do not usually prefer to play short, or they fill up to a full table when other players come in. Many online poker rooms have specific tables specially designed for those that like to play short, they may have heads-up tables and/or tables where a maximum of six players can be seated. Shorthanded games mean even more hands per hour as fewer players have to make decisions. This could mean even greater profitability for the skilled shorthanded player compared to a full game.

12. Players can play at more than one table simultaneously

One of the great advantages of playing online is the ability to play more than one game at the same time. In a full game often there is some dead time as you watch the other players play out their hands. If you do not know the players, this is a useful time to gather information about how they play and use it in the future. However, if you are well versed in their abilities and styles, it can be boring just sitting at the table. In a brick and mortar casino, many people will take this time to chit chat with other players near them, get to know each other, discuss current events or eat a meal. For some players, their primary reason to play poker is for the social aspects, so they rather enjoy this time to talk with friends while playing the game, but online is a different story. Many players know each other online, and can hold interesting conversations, but it is different from a brick and mortar casino. Once you get done with all that stuff, sometimes it can get boring especially if you are dealt junk hand after junk hand and are constantly folding. This is why people like to play more than one table, to deal with the boredom. Instead of getting distracted by non-poker issues, they choose to play two or more games and keep all of their attention on poker. There are the

obvious advantages, but also some not so obvious disadvantages. Playing multiple tables simultaneously is further discussed later in this chapter.

Getting Paid and Bonus Hunting

Since it is your own money at stake, it is your duty to make sure the poker site that you play at is trustworthy. You want to be able to expect to get your withdrawal check when you ask for it. With the huge increase in the popularity of poker in the last few years, and especially the huge increase in the popularity of online poker, many entrepreneurs have and will try to capitalize on this relatively new market. It is possible some of these new sites may actually go under, in which case it would be almost impossible for players to get their money out. How would you go about trying to get a few thousand dollars from an entity in one of the Caribbean Islands whom you don't even know the actual owners? That is one of the dangers of online poker, and it can be scary and very frustrating when the unthinkable happens.

Poker players should take a lesson from their sports betting brethren. The offshore sports betting industry has been around a bit longer than the online poker industry. The sports bettors have seen several very big sports books go under due to mismanagement, insufficient capital and outright fraud. All sportsbooks need clients in order to make money, in the effort to find and retain players, new sportsbooks need to give players an incentive to give them a try. They establish themselves and entice players to join by offering deposit bonuses. This can often lead to a business that seems to be built like a ponzi scheme. An example would be an offer of a 25% cash bonus on a deposit, but with some restrictions such as a five times rollover and a one month minimum period before making a withdrawal. A five times rollover in sports means that the player must bet their balance five times over before they are eligible to take a withdrawal. On the surface, this makes sense from the sportsbook point of view, because it is guaranteeing that they get some minimum action from the player. On the player's side, he is thrilled to get 25% of his deposit as a bonus for just signing up and depositing. Their rationale is that since they are going to play anyway, why not get a bonus as an extra kick.

As the sportsbook signs up more players, they start to get a reputation through the sports gambling forums and word of mouth. With deposits from new players, the sportsbooks have a steady stream of incoming cash flow, which means they will have plenty of funds to pay anyone that requests a withdrawal. This leads to even more confidence by players, especially those that take a withdrawal, because they will now feel more confident about leaving the rest of their money in that book since they already got paid once. It is logical to think if someone paid you once that they are likely to pay you again in the future. However, if the book does not do a good job managing the lines, they may start to lose to the sharp bettors. If the new deposits start to dry up concurrently, then it could lead to the collapse of the ponzi scheme. Now the book no longer has funds to pay everybody and sooner or later the customers will suffer. Yet players still think it is ok to give new sportsbooks a shot, because they believe in the "greater fool" theory. They believe they will be deft enough to get in and get out before the impending doom happens. This is a dangerous game which requires a lot of attention and calculation which most people cannot afford to take the time to do. Of course, poker rooms operate differently than sportsbooks, in that sportsbooks are playing against the customers directly whereas poker rooms are not. But these issues are still useful to keep in mind.

Other than the vague legality issues, this is the biggest danger in the offshore sports betting industry, and all the experienced sports bettors have an understanding of these issues by now since most of them were affected by past collapses. The greed of the bonus hunting leads to the players losing their own deposits. This is a lesson to be learned for the upcoming years as more and more outfits try to take advantage of the online poker boom.

Of course, there are still many reputable offshore sportsbooks, and many of the new poker sites may also be financially fit and well managed. However, from a player's point of view, it is often difficult to identify which site one can trust with one's funds, and which sites one cannot trust. Researching as much as possible is always recommended, but research alone may not always help. Often the sports sites will be backed with confidence from other people that you may think you trust. However it may be that those people are in on the scheme along with the book, or are paid by the book to promote them without doing the due diligence themselves. Planet Poker is a positive example of an online poker room that has the faces of two prominent and trustworthy people in the poker industry, Mike Caro and Roy Cooke. Similarly, Ultimate Bet with Phil Hellmuth and Annie Duke gives the players a sense of financial comfort. However, there has been at least one online poker room that went bust, even though it was promoted by one of the most famous names in poker.

Be more wary of new startups unless you have a good reason to be comfortable. For example, several high quality sportsbooks that have been in business for many years and have impeccable reputations have recently created their own online poker rooms. These poker rooms will be safer than other brand new startups who are not attached to any other known entity. If you are comfortable with the financial status of the online sportsbook, and they are providing online poker as part of their business, then that is may be a safer place for your money than a startup online poker site with no link to an entity you trust.

In order to reduce the hurt if one of these poker sites collapses financially, you need to be preparing ahead of time. You should constantly withdraw funds as your funds increase. Keep in mind a maximum dollar amount that you would be comfortable keeping at the site, and if your balance ever goes past that number, consider making a withdrawal request.

Free Games Online are not very useful as a learning tool

Online poker rooms and other internet sites will often offer games with fake or 'play' money. These games are completely free, no risk no reward. It may be tempting as a new player to think of these games as a nice practice field. Unfortunately, they would not serve that purpose well at all. When playing in these games, it is human nature to play differently when it is free compared to when there is real money at stake. Players will not be afraid to call any bets, they will have no fear of calling raises and they are happy to bluff often. This is not what poker is about at all. The players in a free game do not have anything to lose, and most people will play accordingly. Poker is only poker when there is something at stake, where losing means losing something that has value to the player. Playing in the free games to get an idea of the mechanics of the game is useful, but not as practice for the real money play. It may actually do more harm than good, as you may get the wrong impression of how other players actually play when there is something real at stake.

Pitfalls of playing online

There are more pitfalls to playing online. There are many possible distractions you could have playing online poker that you would not have in a brick and mortar poker room. These distractions include surfing online, writing or reading emails, watching TV or even reading a book (hey, if you are playing online poker right now as you read this, STOP. Either play the game, or read the book, don't do both!). If you know the other players well and are confident you know how they play, you may not lose much by focusing your attention elsewhere. However, even if you do know the players well, they may be playing a bit differently in this particular session than they normally do. Maybe one of them is slightly on tilt, having lost a few bad beats in a row. This may mean they are playing more aggressively on hands that they may normally not play at all. If you know the players well, it is still economically beneficial to pay as much attention as possible to the game. These distractions are all-internal functions. It is your own discipline or lack thereof that will determine if you allow distractions to cause you to lose your focus. It is not something that anyone can tell anyone else to do. It is all up to each player individually.

Many brick and mortar poker rooms will allow players to read magazines or newspapers while sitting at the table. It may seem like one is just as likely to get distracted when playing poker online as playing poker in a brick and mortar casino if you are allowed to read at the table in both places. There is a big difference between the two however, in that when a major occurrence happens in a brick and mortar casino, you will often hear the players talking about it. Even if you are reading, you can hear the commotion and you will lift your head up to see what is going on. The online poker rooms do not have this system. The noise level will be the same whether or not there is a major bad beat or any other interesting issue going on.

Advantages and Disadvantages of playing multiple games simultaneously

Some players like to play more than one game at a time. On one hand, playing multiple games simultaneously may be good in that it forces players to focus completely on poker. On the other hand, one game can be a distraction to the player over the other game. If you are involved in a hand in one game, you will not have the chance to examine the play of the hand in the other game, and that may mean you could miss some important details about how the other players play. In playing multiple games online, you need to weigh the benefit of getting expectation from two games at once versus the negative of possibly losing some expectation from each individual game.

The advantages of playing multiple games simultaneously are obvious for winning players. Although you may reduce your win rate at each table, your overall win rate could increase. If your win rate at each of these tables is at least half of your normal amount at only one table, then you are actually making more money playing two tables simultaneously. If you are playing at three tables at the same time, then your win rate at each table would have to be at least 1/3 of the win rate at one table. This seems like a good deal to most players, and it is a good deal for those that can keep their win rate above those levels. Spend the same amount of time playing poker and make more money, who wouldn't want that? However, for losing players, they will just lose their money at a faster rate. Another way to view multiple tables is to play at a lower limit at each table, whereby the total expectation may be the same as playing at just one table with higher limits. The reason this may be useful is that a player may be able to get the same expectation out of multiple lower limit tables, but gain the advantage of reducing variance. In other words, they get the same reward for less risk through diversification.

In full games, good players will not be involved in as many hands as the average player. This means you will not often find yourself involved in two hands at the same time and so you can devote most of your concentration on the table where you are involved in a hand. For some players, it would seem that they would not lose that much edge playing two full games. Since their win rate would have to slip to less than half of the win rate at one table, it would benefit them to play two full games at once. The poker rooms prefer this because it means they can collect more rake. The poker rooms will have several players playing two games at once, and that may mean spreading one or two or even more tables than they would if players could only play one game at a time. This is a big advantage that online poker rooms have over their brick and mortar counterparts. Playing two tables may alleviate the boredom, and actually steer you away from doing other things that are harmful to your concentration, such as checking out internet sites, listening to the radio, or writing a book (that's a joke folks). So playing multiple tables may actually cause you to concentrate more on each individual table than you would if you were only playing one table at a time and fooling around on the side. The bottom line though, is that if you are a winning player, and do not lose too much edge from your normal win rate, playing more than one table is a nice boost to your profitability and/or a nice reduction of risk..

However, there are disadvantages also. It is harder to concentrate on each table, and you may miss some juicy pieces of information. When playing poker online, the players flit in and out of the table at an incredibly fast rate compared to brick and mortar casinos. It is all too easy to miss the fact that the table composition has changed drastically, and instead of a loose table, now the table is made up of a few more tight players or vice versa. This may lead you to act inappropriately with some hands.

Playing two or more shorthanded tables makes it even tougher. You need to concentrate more on shorthanded games since it is even more important to have a good handle on how each player plays. Also, if a bad, loose player leaves the table and is replaced by a solid, tight player, that changes the characteristic and the composition of the whole table since one player in a shorthanded game makes up a much higher percentage of the table than one player does in a full game. It is too easy to be caught in the situation where a solid player has replaced a loose aggressive poor player and you do not notice it until after you have acted. In shorthanded games, you will be involved in hands more often than at a full table, this means if you are playing two shorthanded games at the same time, you will have a higher chance of being in a situation where you are involved in hands at both tables simultaneously. This is not nearly as much of a concern in the full table games as in the shorthanded games. Another problem is playing one shorthanded game and one full game simultaneously. You may find yourself to be too aggressive in the full game and not aggressive enough in the shorthanded game.

Playing multiple games online will seem like playing a video game at times. For many younger players who grew up in the video game age, this will enhance the experience of the game and make it more fun, although not necessarily more profitable for everyone. These players do not have a problem with the fast changing screens or the action as they are used to it from their experience in video games. For older players who are not used to video games, it may be tougher for them to adjust.

Overall the advantages of playing two full games will outweigh that of playing one full game for

most winning players. As for losing players, unfortunately, playing multiple games will only allow them to lose their money at a faster rate. If you have a good handle on some of the players at each table already, it would add a lot to your advantage. However, in shorthanded games, it is prudent to stick to one game at a time, because you will need more concentration and you will be more likely to be involved in hands at both tables.

Stack Size and Pot Size Online

In online poker, you can easily see how big the pot is and how many bets the other players have left in their stack, whereas in a brick and mortar poker room, sometimes this is difficult to do. People often have both of their hands and arms on the table, as well as water bottles and all sorts of other foreign objects. The player may not be actively trying to hide their stack size, but it may just be circumstantial that you did not realize how many chips he actually had. This can sometimes affect how you play the hand. For example, if you knew your opponent had been losing and was down to just a couple of bets left, you may feel that he will play looser and more aggressive just to get all-in and get the pain over with. This happens fairly frequently and these situations are very easy to identify online but a bit more difficult to notice in the brick and mortar casinos. If you do not notice he is close to going all-in, you may miss the fact that he may be playing more aggressively than normal. Also a player could have a large denomination chip along with the other chips. So it may look like he is short stacked when in fact he is not.

Another situation where seeing the stack size is helpful is when you expect a player is going to go all-in and you want to use him by manipulating his bet for your own purposes. For example, you are first to act in a three player pot. You have a hand you think is strong, but is vulnerable to draws. You would be happy to have a player going all-in to your right. If you are first to act, you can check, hoping the second player also checks. When the short-stacked player bets and goes all-in, you can raise and make it more expensive for the second player to draw out. If the short-stacked player acts first and bets out while going all-in, you can now raise even if you are not sure if you have the all-in player beat, since the portion of your raise will be in the side pot. In an online poker room, you will have no problem seeing that the player has gone all-in, while in a brick and mortar casino, you may not realize it until after you have acted.

Seeing the pot size in exact dollar amounts is helpful in case you were not counting the pot size as this book recommends, but do not use it as a crutch if you also play in real casinos as well. This is because the counting of the pot as the bets go into it is extremely useful to your play in a full brick and mortar game. You can make better and faster decisions if you do not have to stop and take time to count the pot. While playing poker online you can allow the software to add up the pot size for you and make decisions from that information. However, if you are going to be playing poker both online and in a brick and mortar casino, your mind will get lazy and stop the good habit of counting the pot as each hand is played. So you may not find yourself at a disadvantage while playing poker online, but then see that you are at a disadvantage when playing in a real casino.

One benefit of seeing the pot size online is when you are playing multiple games simultaneously. It will be difficult to count the bets going into the pot when you have to concentrate on two different games, so having the ability to see the exact pot size at any time becomes very useful.

Players play more aggressively online

From my experience, it seems that the average player plays a bit differently than the average player in a brick and mortar casino. The main differences are:

1. Players will raise more often
2. Players will bluff more often
3. Players will semi-bluff more often
4. Players will bet for value more often
5. Players will call more often

In general, it seems that the average player online plays much more aggressively and expects other players to play much more aggressively as well. Why is this? What is it about online play that makes the average player play differently?

Here are some possible reasons:

1. There are more younger players online

It is a fact that younger people are more apt to use the internet than older people. It is also probably true that younger people on average are more aggressive and take more chances in life, as well as in poker. Since you are likely to see a higher percentage of younger people (and by younger people, I mean those in their 20s or 30s) playing poker online rather than in brick and mortar casinos, thus you are likely to see a lower percentage of older people playing poker online. That could explain why online games are more aggressive in general.

2. Ambiguity can lead to increased aggression and suspicion.

When players do not see each other face to face, it makes it easier for them to play aggressively against each other. It also makes it easier to be more suspicious of other players. In a brick and mortar casino, you can see all the players, and for some reason, that face to face interaction makes some players less apt to bluff. Maybe they feel bluffing is like stealing and is not socially acceptable. Ambiguity also leads to suspicion. If players do not know or see their opponent, players may become more suspicious that their opponent is doing something underhanded, which may mean bluffing. Thus players are more apt to call in an online game.

3. The money feels less real when it is online.

In a brick and mortar casino, players have to buy their chips with cash. They hand the cashier or the dealer cash in exchange for casino chips. There is a belief that it is easier for players to take more chances with chips than they would with actual cash, as it feels less like real money. Extending this thought further, it is also easier for players to take more chances with cyber-cash than chips or cash. However way the player funded their online account, the cash in their accounts will feel a bit less tangible. Because of this, players are willing to take more chances when playing poker online. This leads to more aggressive play.

Fluctuations will be a lot higher than in a brick and mortar poker room

Online poker players will see much higher profit and loss fluctuations than they would if they played in a brick and mortar poker room. Here are some reasons why:

1. The average online poker player plays more aggressively than the average brick and mortar poker player, as discussed in the previous section.

2. There are also more shorthanded games online than in brick and mortar poker rooms. Naturally, shorthanded games have a higher fluctuation than full table games because all the players are involved in more hands.

3. More hands are dealt in the same time period online.

There are more hands played per hour online, so the results will look much more extreme.

For the purposes of evaluating fluctuations, you want to compare full table games between online and brick and mortar. The correct way to compare the results is to measure them in terms of the number of hands played. It does not make much sense to use an hourly rate because online players may get twice as many hands as brick and mortar players. That means you can fit roughly two hours of equivalent brick and mortar play into one hour of online play.

If you want to compare a shorthanded online game to a full table brick and mortar game, then you have to adjust for two new factors. The first is that shorthanded online games get dealt even more hands per hour than full online games. The second is that players naturally play more aggressively and loosely in shorthanded games. Both factors will increase the fluctuations of all players.

When the extreme fluctuations are on the upside, meaning that player are winning, no one complains. The sky is sunny, everyone is having a good time, life is as it should be. It is when the extreme fluctuations are on the downside that players start to complain, wondering why they have such bad luck, cursing the computer and then wondering if there is a conspiracy against them. They start to wonder maybe the other players are colluding, maybe someone has hacked into the software and the opponent can see all the cards or the future board, maybe the site is rigged to make the poor players win and the good players lose, maybe, maybe, maybe. In times like these, it is important to be strong and not give into the urge to put all the blame on everything and everyone else. It could be that you were playing poorly that day or you just had a string of bad luck, or a combination of the two. These fluctuations will happen in poker and they will happen with greater extremes in online poker. It is at this point that some players enter the internet poker forums claiming they were cheated at certain sites. The phrase to remember in your head for times like these is "If the suckers don't win once in a while, they would never come back." So go take a break from poker for a few minutes, hours or days, as long as you need. Get your head cleared, and come back when you are ready to play without anger or any negative emotions. Just because the computer is there does not mean you have to play every day.

Deception is less useful in online poker

In online poker rooms where many people play, the turnover rate at each table will be pretty high, in fact, this may include you as well. This does not happen in brick and mortar casinos since it is tougher to get into another game, and players are there physically with not much else to do except play poker. This difference in the turnover rate means players should use deception less when playing online.

In brick and mortar poker, sometimes it is useful to use a bit of deception with starting hands in order to throw off some of the observant players, players you may encounter on a daily basis. In most games, even brick and mortar games, players will not be that observant, but in tough games,

it may be worthwhile to use this strategy occasionally. This strategy translates even less to online poker and should be used even less frequently. When the turnover rate is so high, as it usually is online, it means your opponents will not be as observant. Since they are less observant, on average, this means that deception has less value.

Automatic Buttons and Online Tells

The automatic buttons can be useful as you may not want to wait until the action gets to you to tell the computer what you want to do. If an automatic button is clicked on, your action of folding, checking, calling, betting or raising will appear to be instantaneous after the player in front of you acts. This can be a nice feature if you are playing in more than one game. A good time in particular to use it is if you have a starting hand that you know you will fold no matter what the action is in front of you. Thus, clicking on the Check/Fold button will tell the site to fold your hand once the action gets to you. This may allow you to concentrate more on another game and the computer screen will not flutter back and forth between the two games when it is your turn to act. In this instance, there is no advantage or disadvantage in the play of the hand, since you have decided to fold regardless of the action by the other players.

The automatic buttons online can sometimes be used to your advantage but be aware that other players may be watching for clues about your hand based on how you quickly you bet. Sometimes players can determine how strong another player's hand is by how fast they act. Players with strong hands will often have the "Raise" button clicked on where they are telling the site to raise no matter what happens. Sharp players can pick up on this, so when they see someone raising immediately when it is their turn to act, sharp players may consider it as an indication that the raiser indeed has a strong hand. This would be an online tell. Each player is an individual and will have his own patterns. Be on the lookout for these patterns as it may become useful in a pot down the line.

Technology is a wonderful thing, but you still have to watch your back

I was sitting alone in a 10/20 table at one of the online poker rooms that did not have much high limit action. Normally, the highest limit game was only 5/10 at this site and it was rare for a 10/20 game to get started. However since this poker room was attached to an online sportsbook, there was always the chance that someone would show up using his funds from the sportsbook account. Usually these players were not experienced playing poker and were just checking out the poker room to gamble. I had the table up on the computer while watching an NCAA College basketball tournament game and did not think about it as I watched game.

As luck would have it, a player sat down at the table and I was alerted by a beeping noise on the computer. I went to the computer and started playing heads-up with the player. Unfortunately for me, I actually knew the player from previous games. I knew he was a solid player and not one of the possible pushovers that I was hoping for. After a few hands, it was quite clear that neither of us had much of an advantage over the other and it was probably not worth playing any more since the rake is relatively high in heads-up games. In this heads-up game, the button had to put up the small blind while the other player put up the big blind. He was the first to quit, and after his hand on the button, he sat out of the game. Then an interesting thing happened. He quickly sat back in. I had expected he would post the big blind this time and I would get the button and post the small blind. But instead, the button moved back to his seat, and he posted the small blind instead. Since

I had the “Auto Blind” button clicked on, the computer posted my big blind automatically. Boy, was I mad! I had put up the big blind two hands in a row against the same opponent, and I did not have the button on either hand. I was about to leave the table, when I thought maybe I could try the same thing, and get the button in consecutive hands. I played the next hand with the button and the small blind, and in the hand after that, I sat out and came back in. To my delight, it worked! The button came right back to me and the site prompted me to post the small blind. Apparently the other player did not realize what had happened because I kept up the same routine and took the button for at least 20 straight hands. Finally, he sat out and it became clear to him what was going on. What was shocking to me was that this sharp player did not realize it earlier. Maybe he was also playing another game and did not realize what was going on. I was laughing my head off at the situation since I was getting the advantage over him on every hand.

After thinking about it for a night, my conscience got the better of me and I felt a little ashamed of my actions. I decided I would try to make it up to him if I ever saw him again. The next day, I saw the same player at another online poker site. He had the same screen name and it was obvious it was the same player. I told him who I was and offered to give him the chunk of my winnings in that session. He was clearly upset and he refused my offer. He threatened to go to the site and notify them about my transgressions. After that, there was nothing more I could do as he was declining me the chance to make it up to him. Oh well. The moral of this story is that you should always be alert and know the rules and the quirks of each individual site. You need to make sure you are aware of everything so you are not taken advantage of, like this poor fellow was.

Using 4-Color Decks

If there is an option to use a 4-color deck in the online site you are playing on, I recommend that you do so. These decks have different colors for each suit, typically blue for diamonds and green for clubs. If you are playing more than one game at once, it may help avoid confusion in seeing a flush that may not actually be there. It will also help in seeing possible flush draws on the board. The different colors make recognizing the cards just a bit easier.

Different results at different sites

As mentioned in a previous section, fluctuations in online poker can be higher than in brick and mortar casinos. If you play at a few different online sites, this may cause some interesting results. It could look like you are killing the players at one site, but are getting killed by the players at another site. You may start to think that generally players at one site are much better than players at another site. Although it is likely there is some difference in skill among the population of players at different sites, the difference in general skill is probably not very large. For the most part, the fallback opinion should be that the difference in profits and loss is a result of randomness and luck, good luck at one site, bad luck at another. Due to the large fluctuations at online poker, this can easily happen. If you ask those that bet sports you will find a similar situation. Some sports bettors seem to make money hand over fist at one online sportsbook but cannot beat another online sportsbook. They are constantly trying to transfer money out of one account and into the other. Often they will think that the book they are losing to is extremely sharp, and maybe they should not bet there anymore, but typically the true reasons are fluctuation and luck.

With that said, there still may be some logical reasons for these differences in winnings other than plain luck, here's a list of these possible reasons.

1. The site you are winning at has worse players in general and the one you are losing at has better players. As I mentioned before, I do not think the difference in skill level is large, but it can still exist.
2. You are playing in shorthanded games at one site and in full games at another. Your game fits one better than the other.
3. You are being cheated at the site you are losing on.
4. There is a software glitch or quirk at the site that you are losing on and someone else has figured it out

We can control reasons #1 and #2. It should not take too much effort and concentration to determine if either of these issues is the case. If you are indeed a good player, you should be able to identify the weaknesses of other players, and your opinion of the quality of the players at the different sites should be valid. If you notice that you are playing in shorthanded games at one site and in full games at another, then you may want to think about whether your game is more suited for one than the other. Maybe the aggressiveness and the fast play of the shorthanded games do not fit your style. Maybe the patience that is needed at a full table is something that you lack. These issues we can control and make adjustments for.

It is reasons #3 and #4 that we would have problems with and have little control over, and that is discussed in the next section.

Cheating, Collusion and Software glitches

It would be nice if there was a world where everyone is honest and all games are on the up and up. Unfortunately, where there is money, there are people trying to scam it. This is something that everyone should be aware of.

Cheating

I would not be concerned with outright cheating online, either by players or by the site operators. In a brick and mortar casino, this may be a concern. Maybe a dealer is in cahoots with some of the players. Maybe a player has marked some of the cards in the deck. Of course these issues are not concerns in the online atmosphere.

Collusion

Collusion is something that many of us worry about. We worry about other players seeing their friend's cards and using that information to take advantage of us. This may take the form of two players playing side by side, exchanging the information on their hands through the telephone or through an instant messenger. The best way to be protected from collusion is by playing at a fair online site. Online sites have access to the hand histories of every player. If there is a good management team, they can review the hand histories of players when there are complaints. This means they can catch those that collude if the play is obvious given the hands that are shown. But it is probably not possible to catch everyone, so we all need to watch out for this possibility.

Software glitches

Is it possible that a site has a software glitch where some smart computer programmer can re-engineer their system to the point where he may have some inside information? Maybe these

smart programmers can know with some precision what the Flop will bring. Maybe they have a way around the software to be able to figure out some of their opponents' hole cards. These are scary thoughts, and although they may not be probable, it would not be outside the realm of possibilities. There is no proof that a person or a group is doing this, but that does not mean it is not being done. Of course this is a conspiracy theorists' dream, or nightmare, depending on how they are looking at it. The truth is that there are many players making money steadily in online poker, playing the cards, the odds and the opponents. This fact alone should comfort most except the most ardent conspiracy theorists. Coincidentally, these conspiracy theorists usually are not good poker players. I leave it up to the individual reader to determine if this is an issue they think is important for themselves.

Disconnections

Players can get disconnected from their internet connection sometimes. It can happen because of a real disconnection or it could happen when a player tries to take advantage of the system. Most sites have an all-in rule where the disconnected player is considered all-in even when they still have chips on the table. Players who try to take advantage of the system will purposely disconnect their internet connection in the hopes that they get to see a free showdown. They do not want to invest any more money into the pot so they do not want to call any bets or raises. However they still think there is a chance they can win so they purposely disconnect themselves so the system can put them all-in and they still have a chance to win the main pot. Oftentimes you can tell when a player is messing around or not. For example, if the board is K-9-A-T-7 with no flush possibility on the Turn, and a player who got disconnected on the Turn shows 43 on the River, it would be obvious that the disconnection was a genuine one. However if the board shows K-9-A-T-Q, and the disconnected players' hand is J9, then maybe he tried to take advantage of the system because he did not want to have to call on the Turn with an inside straight draw. Players who try this are a real pain to all the other players. Not only is it a form of cheating, but it also really slows down the game as the system will wait the requisite time for the player to act and he is not even there anymore.

Compared to brick and mortar poker rooms

Internet poker opens up some new forms of cheating but it also reduces some other possible ways of cheating that can exist in brick and mortar poker rooms. I believe that cheating in the modern day poker rooms is quite rare, but I would not completely discount it as an impossible feat. The forms of cheating that may be possible in a brick and mortar poker room but would not be possible online include marking cards, crooked dealers in cahoots with other players, switching cards, holding out cards, front loading (seeing other players' cards as the dealer deals them), and sneaking a peek at another player's cards. Everyone likes to talk about the possibilities of getting cheated online, but it seems no one discusses the other forms of cheating that are completely eliminated when playing poker online.

Taking Notes Online

Many poker sites have a method where you can keep notes on your opponents. This is a very useful tool that every player should take advantage of. Taking notes in live play is useful too, but it is not as necessary because the mind has an easier time with forming opinions about players when there is facial recognition. If you have not played with a particular opponent for several months in a brick and mortar casino, you still stand a good chance of remembering roughly how

the player plays. This is more difficult to pick up while playing poker online because there is no facial recognition. It is harder to associate a name with the qualities of the person than it is to associate a face with the qualities of the person. So using the notes tool that is provided by many poker sites should help.

Here are some of the types of notes that you should be taking on your opponents:

How loose or tight do they play pre-Flop?

How loose or tight do they play after the Flop?

How aggressive or passive are they?

Will they bet when it seems like their edge is small or will they check?

Do they check raise often?

Do they semi-bluff raise often or do their raises need to be given a lot of respect to?

Do they often cold call raises in shorthanded games?

Do they three bet from the small blind situation when a late position player open raises or do they just call?

How often do they defend their blinds with hands that do not warrant it?

The answers to these questions are useful to know. If you have taken notes on a player, the next time you encounter the player at the table, you would immediately be able to take a look at your previous notes and have a better idea of how he plays.

Review of Online Poker Sites and Poker Informational Sites

Online poker is a new industry and that means changes occur very quickly. There are new online poker sites all the time and informational sites. Instead of listing these sites in this book, I will have a page on HoldemBrain.com with information on online poker sites and poker informational sites. If one is going to play poker or look up informational sites online, one will have to go online anyway, so make a pitstop at HoldemBrain.com to check out current reviews.